

BRASS AND PERCUSSION IN CHURCH WORSHIP

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What does the Bible teach about how instruments should be used in worship? This is a burning issue today. Those who advocate the uninhibited use of solo instrumental 'numbers' and groups point to the Old Testament and say that God allowed all kinds of instruments and large orchestras to contribute a major musical element to worship. If God, they reason, is the same yesterday, today and forever, He must want the same kind of worship today.

But is it true that God allowed full instrumental worship in the Jewish church? Is it true, for example, that timbrels (tambourines), played by dancing maidens, led the worship? Is it true that the Jews regularly worshipped with percussion instruments and brass, and that these generated powerful, rhythmic music?

A brief look at the data will show that this idea is a thousand miles wide of the mark. In the Old Testament, God put very firm restrictions on the use of instruments, obviously to prevent the over-enjoyment of music at the human level from overpowering and eclipsing spiritual worship. Instruments were allowed, but only some, and only at certain times. So the Old Testament example teaches a great principle which is tragically thrown away by new-style worshippers today.

We realise that the Church of Jesus Christ is not under the rules of the Old Testament. Their order of worship does not bind us today. However, the general principles then taught by God still apply, and this is why we must examine the claim that God allowed uninhibited instrumental and rhythmic worship.

Before looking at the facts, one general point must be made about worship. The promoters of new-style worship say that we may do almost anything in worship, so long as it is done to the glory of God. If we may play the bagpipes and drums at home, we may also use them to the glory of God in the church, as an act of worship. The only issue to worry about (they say) is that of public 'taste'. (If, for example, the bagpipes may offend worshippers, then for that reason alone they would be inappropriate.) In principle, however, if we may use an instrument or style of music to the glory of God in private or social life, we may also use it to the glory of God in worship. That is the reasoning put forward by advocates of new worship trends.

This policy, however, is mistaken because it overlooks a vital rule of the Bible -- that GOD SEPARATES DIRECT WORSHIP FROM ALL OTHER THINGS DONE BY HIS CHILDREN. All that we do in life must be done to His glory, but direct worship is a uniquely special activity, governed by special rules and guidelines. We shall see in what follows that THE OLD TESTAMENT SPEAKS OF AT LEAST EIGHT KINDS OF INSTRUMENT IN COMMON USE BY THE PEOPLE OF THOSE DAYS, AND ALL WERE PERMITTED IN PRIVATE, SOCIAL AND CIVIC LIFE. HOWEVER, ONLY FOUR OF THESE WERE PERMITTED IN DIRECT WORSHIP IN THE HOUSE OF GOD. It is immensely important to be aware of this.

BANNED INSTRUMENTS

Take, for example, the flute. We read of various items in the flute family such as the pipe (the halil) - a sideways-played flute with three to four holes. We read of the dulcimer -- a double flute. But no kind of flute was allowed in Temple Worship.

Why was this? Because the Lord was teaching the necessity of some restrictions, so that minds would participate in spiritual worship without being distracted by too many instruments.

Other instruments used by the Jews but excluded from the Temple were the timbrel or tabret, which was a tambourine, and the 'organ', which was a seven-to-ten-pipe giant mouth organ (probably with reeds). All these could be used for recreation and outdoor civic festivals, but not in the house of God. The modern claim, therefore, that anything could be used, is wrong.

EMPHATIC COMMANDS

Where does this information about restrictions come from? Is it speculation by biblical scholars? No, it is plainly set out in the Bible. In various texts (1 Chronicles 15:16,28; 16:5,6,42; 25:1,6) we read of the instruments appointed in the time of David (by divine inspiration) to be used in direct worship in the Tabernacle and Temple. We will see later that these limited instruments were cut even further for 'local' and private worship. The Temple instruments were psaltery, harp and cymbals.¹ These were to be played by Levites. The priests only were to employ the trumpet (including the cornet), for special purposes.² These four were only half the number of instruments in common use at the time.

At the time of King Hezekiah these rules were reaffirmed in 2 Chronicles 29:25-26: 'He set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer., for so was the commandment of the Lord by his prophets. And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets.'

Only three types of instrument were to be played by Levites, and one by priests. But in what way were they used? The following verses tell us.

'And when the burnt offering began, the song of the Lord began also with the trumpets, and with the instruments ordained by David king of Israel. And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded: and all this continued until the burnt offering was finished. And when they had made an end of offering, the king and all that were present with him bowed themselves, and worshipped.'

Was the music characterised by strong rhythm? The idea that it was is pure speculation. We are told that the trumpets called the people to solemn assemblies, and accompanied the burning of the offering -- a serious, awe-producing, and even shame-producing activity. The Hebrew term for 'solemnity' appears in the description of these acts of worship. In the light of this, it is most probable that the trumpets and cymbals were played to stir the people to gravity (the cymbals holding the timing of the singing). THE IDEA OF MODERN-IDIOM MUSIC IS HORRIFICALLY 'READ INTO' THESE WORSHIP PASSAGES.

Of course, worship has a strongly joyful element, but to see the Tabernacle-Temple orchestras as beat groups is obviously absurd. We note that there were no drums or tambourines in these orchestras (as there are today on very many church platforms).

SMALL ORCHESTRAS

We also note that the instruments only played during the burning of the offering, and then the music ended, and everyone continued to worship without them.

At the time of David the orchestra of the house of the Lord appears to have consisted of twenty-seven players (1 Chronicles 25:1-5). If this is a correct understanding, then it was an extremely modest orchestra to carry the singing of a huge number of worshippers.³ FROM THIS RATHER SMALL PROVISION, IT IS CLEAR THAT THIS MUSIC WAS NOT DESIGNED TO DOMINATE OR DETRACT FROM INTELLIGENT ... WORSHIP.

Centuries later, when Temple worship was restored by Ezra and Nehemiah, the four-instrument rule was scrupulously followed, confirming that it was the binding rule for the Jews. (See Ezra 3:10 and Nehemiah 12:27.)

All these instructions applied firstly to the second stage of the recovery of the ark,¹ and later to all worship in the Temple. The same instrumentation, however, was not prescribed for local synagogue worship.⁴ This was much simpler, the cymbals and trumpets disappearing. IT IS NOW IMPOSSIBLE TO READ THE BIG-BEAT IDEA INTO THE BIBLE. THE STRINGED INSTRUMENTS APPOINTED FOR 'ORDINARY' WORSHIP WERE SWEET RATHER THAN CLAMOROUS.

In Psalms we see that harps and psalteries were the only intended instruments for the accompaniment of psalms in private or synagogue worship.⁵ There was to be no brass or percussion. The very title 'Psalter' is, by definition, a collection of songs sung to harp accompaniment. Psalm 92 provides an example of this instruction. The title or heading over the psalm says that it was 'A Psalm or Song for the sabbath day'. It is to be sung (verse 3) on an instrument of ten strings, the psaltery, and the 'harp with a solemn sound'. In this psalm no new moon or special feast is in mind, and it is therefore to be accompanied only by the basic stringed instruments.

The following psalms also set forth the rule that psalms were to be sung to harps and psalteries: Psalm 33, 43, 49, 57, 71, 92, 108, 144 and 147. In Psalms 4 and 55 the titles mention stringed instruments, and in Psalm 12 the title prescribes an eight-stringed lyre (a type of harp). With these modest and appropriate instruments the singing was supported in all private or synagogue worship.

ARE THERE CONTRADICTIONS?

The rules of the Old Testament are clear, but they sometimes seem to be contradicted in the Psalms. Advocates of new-style worship point to passages such as Psalm 68:25 where David mentions 'the damsels playing with timbrels', and insist that this justifies the use of a tambourine. In several other psalms David seems to contradict his own rules (or rather, those which God gave him). It is from these verses that many new-style worship writers take their licence to organise events such as worship concerts.

Their interpretation and use of these verses is, however, clearly wrong, because the Bible is made to contradict itself, and there is no contradiction in God's Word. It is not possible that God would give definite commands in one place, and totally contradict them in another. This fact should make us examine more carefully those passages which seem to contradict the rules. When we do so, we see at once that the banned instruments were not being used in the direct worship of God, but in civic, outdoor festivals held to commemorate great battles of history.

We should not forget that the Israelites were a nation-state as well as a church. There were many things they were permitted to do as a state, which had no place in their formal, direct worship. Special processions, victory parades and thanksgiving days were open-air, civic activities. The little girls would lead these processions dancing and shaking their tambourines. But these were never allowed in the Temple.

The timbrel-tambourine of Psalm 68 is obviously part of a civic activity. The psalm, though predictive and messianic, is based on a notable military victory. It refers to the chariots of God, and how a conqueror led a host of captives after the battle. It speaks of future victories. God's power -- as learned about in the sanctuary -- is now remembered 'in the streets', and 'the singers went before, the players on instruments followed after; among them were the damsels playing with timbrels.' The psalm includes reference to both aspects of Jewish life -- civic festivity and direct worship. There is no contradiction of the Temple rules.

ANOTHER 'TIMBREL' PSALM

In Psalm 81:2 the timbrel is found again. 'Take a psalm, and bring hither the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the psaltery.' It is a psalm of Asaph. Was he breaking the rules and including a prohibited instrument in worship? The answer is no, for his psalm is a summons to the people to join in the worship and festivities of the Feast of Tabernacles. This was the most joyful of all the feasts. It commemorated the deliverance of the people from Egypt, their survival in the wilderness, and the 'harvest' of the Promised Land.

During the seven days of the feast all Israelites lived in 'booths' or 'tents' made of palm branches, symbolising the tents of the wilderness journeyings. This feast, with its offerings, was also the nation's harvest festival. It was obviously a time when virtually every outdoor cultural instinct was given expression to, and much music accompanied the long processions of Israelites journeying to Jerusalem for the feast. Naturally, the 'maidens' played their timbrels, and the Hebrew national dance was much in evidence during the evening hours in every camp.

With these scenes of national festivity in mind we realise that Asaph made no mistake over the instruments. He did not add the tambourine to the Temple orchestra, nor prescribe it as an instrument for direct worship.

Psalm 98:5-6 mentions the harp for accompanying psalm-singing, and adds trumpets. These were to be blown by the priests on special feast days only. Sure enough, this psalm includes the commemoration of great victories, and the worship of special days is therefore in mind.

The formula is as ever -- tambourines and cultural dance for national festivities, sweet, harp-like instruments for normal worship, and trumpets and cymbals added for Temple worship.

DANCE AND PERCUSSION

The two final psalms are constantly quoted by the promoters of new-style worship as a justification for the uninhibited use of instruments (with dancing) in direct worship.

Psalm 149 includes the verse, 'Let them praise his name in the dance: let them sing praises unto him with the timbrel and harp' (verse 3).

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the Hebrew word translated 'dance' really does mean this. (Many authorities believe that the original word, which means 'twisting', could equally well refer to a twisting, curling type of horn or trumpet, rather than a dance.)

The question is -- Does the psalmist refer to direct worship, or to the national festivities of the Jews, including the victory festivals with all their outdoor rejoicing? As we read through the psalm the answer becomes obvious. Psalm 149 is not specifically about direct worship, for it ranges widely over every aspect of national and private life. The psalmist encourages the people of God to be a rejoicing people in every department of life -- worship, civic, business and pleasure. The 'dancing' clearly refers to the cultural, recreational life of the nation. SCHOLARS TELL US THAT THE SWIRLING OR TWISTING DANCE OF THE HEBREWS WAS A POPULAR ACTIVITY IN THE VILLAGE, ESPECIALLY AMONG THE TEENAGERS AND CHILDREN. IT WAS FAR REMOVED FROM THE SEX-BASED, PHYSICAL-CONTACT OF TODAY, AND HAD A PLACE IN THE GREAT CIVIC FESTIVALS.

The fifth verse of the psalm, curiously, encourages the people to sing aloud upon their beds, while the sixth verse desires that they should praise God with a two-edged sword in their hands. Were they literally to take beds and swords into the Temple, and somehow employ them in direct worship? Obviously not. These verses range from private worship in the night to military service for the Lord.

The seventh verse of the psalm calls for vengeance to be executed upon the heathen, and the eighth for their kings to be bound with chains. Because this psalm includes civic festivities and victory pageants, we should not be surprised to find tambourines and dancing referred to. The rules for the Temple (for direct-worship) are not contradicted. THE LORD WANTS MODESTY AND SIMPLICITY, NOT ENTERTAINMENT, SHOW, NOISE, UNNECESSARY DIVERSITY OF INSTRUMENT, AND HUMAN OSTENTATION.

What about Psalm 150? It summons God's people to praise Him with tambourines, dance, and organs, alongside the permitted Temple instruments. (The organ, we have already observed, was a seven-to-ten-pipe wind instrument.) The psalm opens - 'Praise ye the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power.'

The 'sanctuary' mentioned here is described as God's 'mighty expanse' or 'mighty heavens'. It is not the earthly Temple, but the temple of the entire universe, even of the infinite expanse beyond the universe, where angels fly at God's command, and the Earth is a tiny speck.⁶ How should we praise such a God?

The sixth verse of the psalm tells us that instruments cannot themselves be a channel of praise. Only things that have breath can worship. Only living souls can praise the Lord. In the light of this, the psalm only makes sense when understood as a richly figurative psalm, using the tone characteristics of various instruments to describe the different emotions of true worship.

The Puritan David Dickerson expresses this in his renowned commentary on the Psalms. He observes that 'the plurality and variety of these instruments were fit to represent divers conditions of the spiritual man ... and to teach what stirring up there should be of the affections and powers of our soul for God's worship. What melody each should make in himself .., to show the excellency of God's praise, which no instrument, nor any expression of the body could adequately set forth with trumpet, psaltery, etc.'

ASPECTS OF MOOD

The Scottish preacher Andrew Bonar writes: 'In this psalm's enumeration of musical instruments, there is a reference to the variety which exists among men in the mode of expressing joy, and in the mode of exciting feeling.' The psalm, in other words, lists the instruments not as those to be literally used, but as representing the range of emotions which form heartfelt worship. The instruments are purely figurative or representative. This is the traditional interpretation of this psalm.

The trumpet (verse 3) represents the note of victory. Our praise should be resounding, triumphant and exalted. The psaltery and the harp give the sweet, sweet tones of gratitude and love. Praise should be feelingful. The timbrel and the dance (verse 4) speak of the effervescent energy, effort and enthusiasm of children and young people engaged in a favourite activity. Praise requires and demands all these qualities in the heart of the worshipper.

Organs were instruments of pleasure rather than worship, and we are therefore reminded that true praise should be the highest enjoyment of believers, not merely a duty.

The fifth verse brings in loud and resounding cymbals, an obvious allusion to the volume, strength and power of worthy praise.

One popular study Bible remarks of this psalm that the writer calls for praise with all kinds of musical instruments. But to take this very literal view of the psalm produces a major contradiction in the Bible. God is seen to make firm rules [in regard to the use of instruments in worship], and then to call for them to be broken. Psalm 150 cannot and does not cancel the restriction placed on Old Testament music for worship.

THE ORGAN OF TODAY

Someone may object that the church organ of today is a large number of instruments bound together in one. This is so, but in its favour, it is 'played by a single instrumentalist. Therefore, by uniting its voices in one general sound it may claim -- when played modestly and sensibly -- to be a single instrument.

THE STANDARD OF GOD REMAINS -- THAT MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS SHOULD BE MODEST IN CHARACTER, LIMITED IN NUMBER, AND THAT THEY SHOULD NEVER BE ALLOWED TO OVERWHELM THE INTELLIGENT AND SINCERE OFFERING OF WORSHIP EMANATING FROM THE MINDS AND HEARTS OF BELIEVERS. The idea that the Old Testament sanctions the musical antics of the present time is based on an extremely superficial and mistaken view of the biblical data.

WORSHIP IS NOT FOR HUMAN EXHIBITIONISM -- GOD RESISTS THE PROUD. IT IS NOT TO SHOW OFF OR TO ADMIRE HUMAN ARTISTIC ABILITY. MUSICAL AIDS MUST NEVER BE ALLOWED TO TURN WORSHIP INTO ENTERTAINMENT. THEY MUST NEVER INTERFERE WITH THE SPIRITUAL CHARACTER OF WORSHIP.

Traditional worship promotes awe and reverence, spirituality and thoughtfulness. Joy must flow from the heart, and not be worked up by the excessive use of external helps.

Traditional worship is based on biblical worship, which observes certain restraints. The Lord trusts His people to use musical helps to assist their praise, but that trust must never be abused. This trust is completely disregarded by modern-style worship.

FURTHER INFORMATION AS FOOTNOTES

1 David's first assembly of instruments for the first and disastrous recovery of the ark included timbrels or tambourines (2 Samuel 6:5; 1 Chronicles 13:8). While the ark remained at the house of Obededom, David radically reformed and revised all the arrangements for its transportation to bring them into line with the law. At this time he was given (with Gad, the king's seer) new commands for musical instruments (2 Chronicles 29:25). The timbrel was not now included, and never again appears in any list of instruments for direct or Temple worship. The second stage of the recovery of the ark (representing the ongoing rule) was accomplished without them. The cymbals were probably mainly used as a means of conducting the orchestra, as in 1 Chronicles 15:19 only Asaph, the chief musician, and other leaders play them.

2 The history of the use of the trumpet in worship went back to Numbers 10 where God commanded two silver trumpets for the calling of the people to the Tabernacle. The priests were to play them, and continued to do so in future generations. They were to be blown on special feasts and in the beginning of months over the burnt offerings to remind the people of the nature of their historic deliverance. They were never instruments for accompanying 'ordinary' worship. Generally, the number of trumpets used on special occasions continued to be two (1 Chronicles 16:6). Exceptionally, 120 priests played trumpets at the consecration of Solomon's Temple. This was the largest crowd ever gathered for worship, and the largest and longest burning of offerings.

3 The orchestra assembled to accompany the ark for the second stage of its recovery (an open-air procession) had three cymbals, eleven lyres and six harps. Once the ark was inside the tent the orchestra was reduced to eight harps and lyres, one cymbal and two trumpets. The size of the orchestra changed, but never the types of instrument. The restriction was maintained. In 1 Chronicles 25:1-7, the total number of musicians was 288, of which about 260 were the choir.

4 'Synagogue' is a New Testament word, but we use it here as a useful term for regional and district centres of worship -- in other words, the Jewish local church.

5 With the single exception of Psalm 5, which was to be accompanied with a lone flute. This very plaintive psalm was sung on pilgrimage.

6 Some expositors say this speaks of both the earthly sanctuary and the wider firmament. In this case, this psalm is another which covers the whole spectrum of life -- from Temple worship to civic and social life.

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